1987

Juan Hamilton: Selected Works

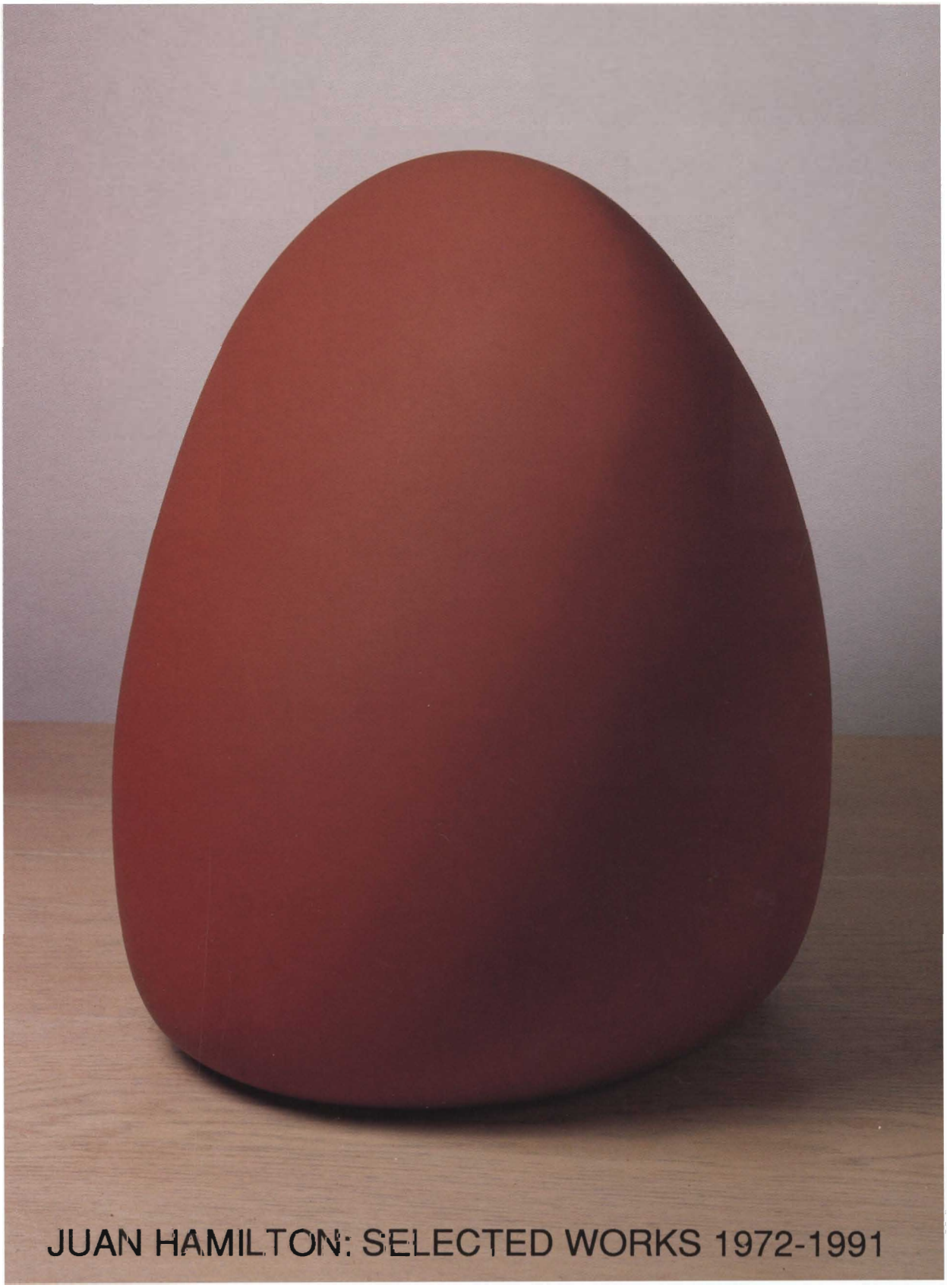
George W. Neubert
Director, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Barbara Rose
Robert Miller Gallery

S H E L D O N

SOLO

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY



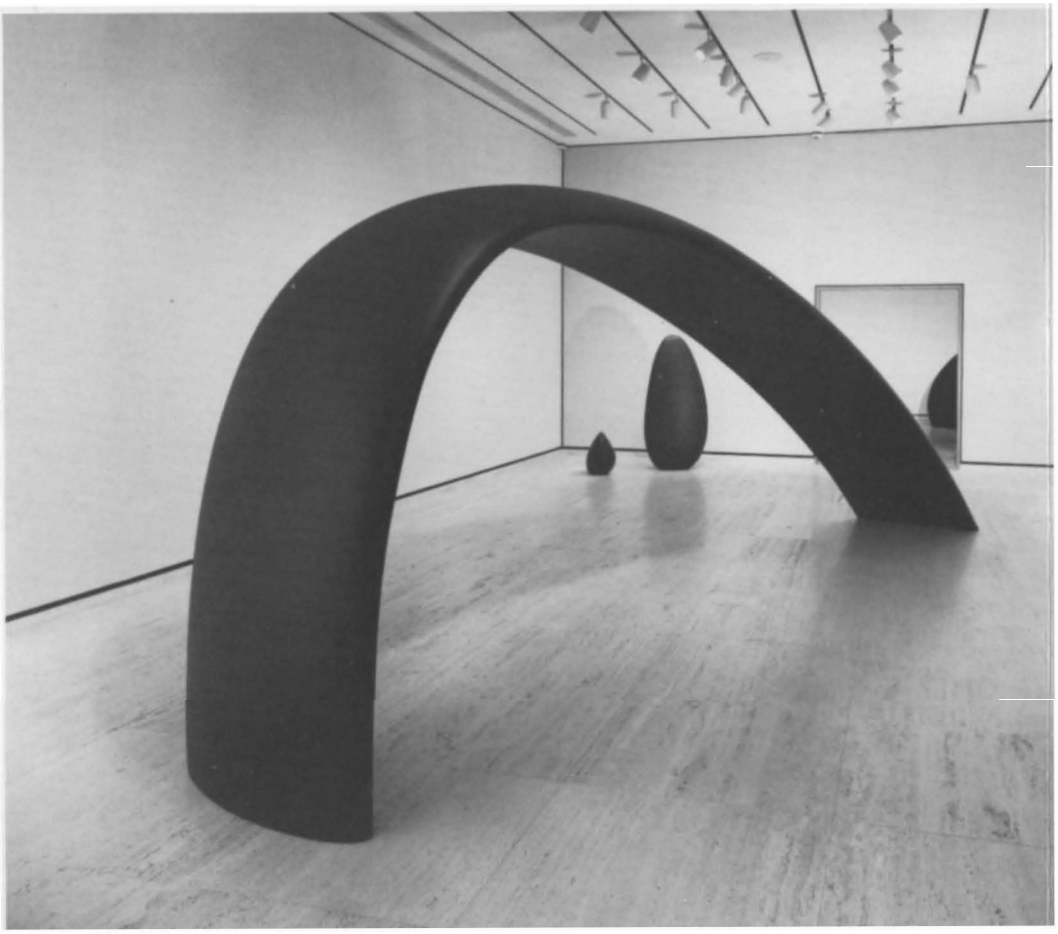
JUAN HAMILTON
SELECTED WORKS 1972-1991

PREFACE

It seems particularly appropriate that the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln presents the exhibition *Juan Hamilton: Selected Works 1972-1991*. It is apparent that Hamilton's encounter with the reductive form of *Princess X*, 1916 by the 20th Century master sculptor, Constantin Brancusi, had a profound impact and influence on his own mature aesthetic. The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, designed by Philip Johnson, has had on permanent display in the Great Hall this sculpture since its opening to the public in 1963. Though Juan Hamilton was cognizant (prior to his collegiate studies at Hastings College in Nebraska) of Brancusi's sculpture, it seems that the biomorphic and columnar fluidity of *Princess X* had a lasting influence on his own sculptural vocabulary. It was also here on the remote plains of the Nebraska prairie that Hamilton found the solitude to pursue the medium of ceramics--the vessel that became the central metaphor for his sculpture.

This exhibition, a selection of twenty-eight works dating from 1972 through 1991, traces Hamilton's sculptural development from his early, intimate, hand-built raku vessels to the large-scale, monolithic, cast bronze forms to his most recent wood carved sculptures. Hamilton's oeuvre reflects his lifelong pursuit of a universal vocabulary--a formal creation of presence. Committed to quality and the continuum of the modernist tradition, he creates highly refined organic shapes which seem to have been formed by the natural elements of time, wind and water. Reductively simple, enigmatic and mysterious, Hamilton's sculpture provides a tranquil and meditative quality which evokes something pure and ideal.

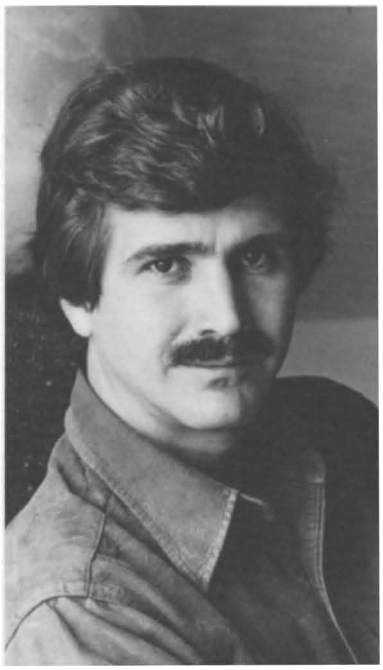
George W. Neubert
Director
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
University of Nebraska-Lincoln



EXHIBITION INSTALLATION VIEW. LEFT TO RIGHT: 15, 21, 26 AND PARTIAL VIEW OF 24, IN THE FAR GA

17. UNTITLED 1986, steel and fiberglass, black lacquer, 49 x 60 x 38 in.

11. FRAGMENT X-O, 1983-91, bronze , 80 x 114 1/4 x 29 in.



Juan Hamilton was born December 22, 1945, in Dallas, Texas. He lived in Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela from 1946 to 1960 where his father was a bilingual educational consultant. In 1960, he moved to New York City where he attended City College and New York University. He received his Bachelor's degree from Hastings College in Nebraska. From 1969 to 1970 Hamilton attended the MFA Program at Claremont Graduate School and studied under Henry Takemoto, Paul Soldner, and David Grey. Hamilton moved to Vermont in 1970 where he worked as an independent artist. In 1973 he began work as Georgia O'Keeffe's assistant. He supervised numerous publications and exhibitions of her work and that of Alfred Stieglitz. Hamilton's sculpture is represented in public collections such as the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, NY; and The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

ESSAY

Juan Hamilton's new work reveals changes in terms of formal vocabulary and technical sophistication that substantially extend his range as an artist. Because Hamilton is dedicated to quality and to the continuity of tradition, these changes have been evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Newness in his case is never novelty, but a gradual increase of skill and vision. Thus the current matte black bronze sculptures executed during the past two years differ from the preceeding sleek, polished bronzes and lacquered bronzes in a number of ways that are significant: they are larger, more distinctively sculptural in their conscious use of all 360 degrees of changing viewpoints, each one different as the viewer moves around Hamilton's subtle sloping shapes. Perhaps most importantly, the new works absorb rather than reflect light. This drawing away from light, as opposed to playing with a seductive flickering, enhances our sense of them as looming, mysterious presences, which display a new sense of gravity, a deliberate heaviness that is more illusion than reality.

That Hamilton began his artistic career as a ceramist may explain why his forms, although they are monolithic, still communicate the personal touch of the artist's hand--the feeling of modeling rather than of cutting out or of slicing a form from a pre-existing block that we normally associate with the monolith. Moreover, there are no hard edges in Hamilton's art: plane meets plane softly, gently - another indication of his decisive rejection of the machine aesthetic that has more characterized recent modern art. Certainly, simple, reductive forms are within the mainstream of modernist sculpture. However, they are much closer to the spiritual aesthetic that originally inspired Brancusi than they are to the materialist empiricism of minimal art.

Brancusi has been an important and acknowledged interest of Hamilton's since he began to make sculpture. However, it was not the repetitions of the *Endless Column* or the elaborate carved bases which became sculptures in themselves that attracted him to the art of the visionary Rumanian artist. Rather, it was Brancusi's regard for craftsmanship and the artisan tradition, and his ability to convey the complex feeling through the apparently simplest, most reductive means that have inspired Hamilton. Although conceptual artists mistakenly took Brancusi as an ancestor figure, Brancusi himself was a mystic more concerned with theosophy than philosophy, emotional expression rather than cerebral theorizing. In this sense, Hamilton's mysterious hovering forms are also distanced from the objectness of minimal art. Their intention, as well as their expression, is far more consonant with Brancusi's otherworldliness. Hamilton's works are enigmatic undefinable presences rather than specific objects. In this respect, they have in common with the mysterious visionary art of Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis their grand impersonal anonymity. Like Pollock's webs and Louis's veils, Hamilton's vessels are made in a way that is difficult if not impossible to figure out, unless the artist discloses the secret of his technique of making forms that look as ancient as the earth itself. How, for example, can these pieces, which appear solid and weighty as mountains, be moved about? How are they actually made? What gives them their mysterious light-absorbing matte finish, the apparent antithesis of the glossy patina of bronze? First, there is the manner in which the forms take shape: the initial step is building a steel grid

armature that Hamilton bends and alters until he arrives at the form that satisfies him. Then fiberglass covers the armature, shaped once again by the artist's hands in a direct and intuitive personal manner. When the fiberglass shell is entirely smoothed and dried, it is sent to the foundry where it is cast in bronze. The final steps in the finishing process, which account for the quality and originality of the finish consist of applying coat after coat of black lacquer, with the surface being water-sanded between each coat. This abrasion of the lacquer does not end until the finely polished surface has a dry, grainy feeling not unlike the smooth matte surfaces of the adobe houses in New Mexico, where Hamilton has lived and worked for the past fifteen years. While restoring an abandoned adobe house in Barranco, a village near Abiquiu, he learned the traditional techniques the Indians use to give adobe a uniform color and surface. This experience of working with an original Native American technique of shaping and forming, as much as the gently curved contours of the adobe houses, in which there are no hard edges or straight lines, undoubtedly made a profound impression on the young artist. By incorporating a variety of techniques to create and finish his work Hamilton has combined into an original synthesis several traditions: that of the adobe builders, Brancusi's simplicity, and the sense of peace, silence, and harmony of the Japanese Zen gardens he visited during a trip to Japan in 1970. This trip, he will readily admit, altered his vision of the function and value of art.

If some of the shapes resemble the rocks in Japanese Zen gardens, whereas others loom as unknown presences as enigmatic as the heads of Easter Island or the perfectly simple monolithic forms of Cycladic idols, whose meaning we still do not totally understand, this resemblance is not coincidental but intended. Hamilton wishes to create art that is simultaneously familiar yet strange, related to natural and anatomical forms, yet based on neither. An art that can touch us; even more to the point, its rubbed surfaces makes us want to touch it. He treads a thin line, in these new black bronzes more than ever before, between intimacy and distance, overtness and unknowability, the commonplace and the mysterious. The context of these opposing qualities, which calls on the tension of paradox to make the work so intensely alive despite its coal blackness, is deliberately restricted.

Like all genuinely visionary artists, Hamilton has a vision. For him, there are no choices: he sees things a certain way and then makes what he sees. Because he has the rare capacity to communicate, he avoids solipsism: the forms that please him please us all in their completeness and universality. Neither stones nor rocks, they nevertheless create a personal landscape of animistic shapes, as if each form were inhabited by a distinct individual spirit. Because we know they must be hollow within, the sense of a spirit dwelling is enhanced.

Hamilton's central metaphor is the vessel. This is indeed the *Ur* image of *homo faber*: the first thing man made, perhaps even before he made tools and weapons, but at least as early, was the vessel for water, food, or fire. Implicit in this metaphor is not only the sense that something is secretly contained within the closed form, but also the double-edged mystical connection between the full and the void. Without one, we cannot conceive of the other. Sculpture that displaces space like the solid monolith never suggests interior space as Hamilton's forms do. Thus another paradox is exploited.

Some artists have attempted to escape time by denying history. This is not the case with Hamilton, who willingly apprenticed himself to a tradition of craftsmanship, mastering his technique and medium in order to extend its possibilities of expression. The sleekness of his forms suggest a futuristic vision, yet their allusion to the antiquity of stones smoothed and worn away by time lends them a sense of timelessness. Metaphorically stretching two ways, lifted from the ground to float or loom above us, yet centered and pulled earthward by the evident force of gravity, these timeless shapes Hamilton has created invoke the contemplative mode of the great visionary paintings of Newman and Rothko, which encourage a state of gratified serenity and abstract purity, where form and matter transcend themselves. Thus the vision of the far-sighted artist rejects mirroring specific moment, searching instead for the universal symbol, and expression of the primordial consciousness of being. Juan Hamilton is among the handful of visionary artists working today who have had the courage to spurn the cheap thrills of the here and now in pursuit of a higher reality.

Barbara Rose
Independent Scholar

Essay written and published for the 1987 exhibition at the Robert Miller Gallery, New York, N. Y.

CHECKLIST

1. UNTITLED
1972, stoneware, ash glaze
9 x 12 1/2 x 13 in.

2. UNTITLED
1975, clay, black lacquer
14 x 14 x 15 1/2 in.

3. UNTITLED
1975, clay, white raku
11 x 14 x 12 in.

4. BLACK CLOUD
1975, clay, black lacquer
13 1/2 x 15 x 16 3/4 in.

5. UNTITLED
1975, stoneware clay, white raku
9 x 15 x 14 3/4 in.

6. UNTITLED
1978, bronze, white lacquer
1! 1/4 x 14 x 12 1/2 in.

7. UNTITLED
1978, clay, black lacquer
39 1/2 x 10 x 10 1/4 in.

8. ABSTRACTION
1978, clay, black lacquer
15 1/2 x 18 x 12 in.

9. ABSTRACTION
1979, bronze, black lacquer
26 x 22 x 20 1/2 in.
Artist proof

10. UNTITLED
1981, bronze, black lacquer
24 x 28 x 38 in.

11. FRAGMENT X-O
1983-91, bronze
80 x 114 1/4 x 29 in.

12. DISC
1983, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
8 1/2 x 38 x 38 in.

13. UNTITLED
1984, clay, white lacquer
41 1/2 x 10 x 10 3/4 in.

14. UNTITLED
1985, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
14 x 45 x 35 in.

15. CURVE AND SHADOW #3
1985, welded aluminum, black lacquer
96 x 288 x 44 in.

16. UNTITLED
1986, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
85 x 62 x 31 in.

17. UNTITLED
1986, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
49 x 60 x 38 in.

18. BRUJA
1988, bronze, red patina
15 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 13 3/4 in.
Edition: 1/7

19. BLACK MOON #3
1990, steel and fiberglass,
black lacquer
27 x 28 x 28 in.

20. SICKLE
1990, laminated oak, black
lacquer
53 x 98 x 2 1/2 in.

21. FOR ANNIE
1990, clay, black lacquer
21 x 19 x 14 1/2 in.

22. EGYPT I
1991, laminated pine, black lacquer
30 x 28 x 27 3/4 in.

23. EGYPT II
1991, laminated pine, black lacquer
82 x 26 x 26 in.

24. EGYPT III
1991, laminated pine, black lacquer
63 1/2 x 39 1/2 x 39 in.

25. MY LITTLE EGYPT
1991, clay, black lacquer
18 x 17 x 15 in.

26. PARABOLA
1991, plywood and fiberglass, black lacquer
70 x 34 x 15 in.

27. WING BONE I
1991, bronze, white lacquer
2 3/4 x 70 1/2 x 3 1/2 in.

28. WING BONE II
1991, laminated pine, black stain
6 x 146 x 7 1/4 in.

ON THE COVER: **18. BRUJA**

Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one person exhibitions of art by nationally recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present the art of our time in an art historical perspective. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who is contributing to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the presentation of contemporary art issues.

Nebraska Arts Council

The Sheldon Solo series is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency. Additional funding has been provided by the Nebraska Arts Council through a Special Projects grant and the Nebraska Art Association.

SHELDON MEMORIAL
ART GALLERY & SCULPTURE GARDEN
University of Nebraska - Lincoln • Lincoln, NE 68588-0300